#RIP Patrick O'Connell: HIV/AIDS Visionary and Father of the Red Ribbon

O'Connell's massive impact on the world may never fully be known. But it sure as hell deserves our deepest appreciation.

May 5, 2021 By Shawn Decker

In the 1980s, AIDS decimated the art world. From fashion to music and everything in between, it's not hyperbole to suggest that we'll never know the incredible contributions to society that the artists we lost took with them when they passed.

But the reaction to this tragedy also had an effect on art and, in particular, how art itself could be used to draw attention to the epidemic in the early days. Patrick O'Connell recognized this need and he possessed the talent, drive and social network to help create Visual AIDS, an organization that continues to support artists with HIV and raise awareness about the epidemic to this day. Patrick was also responsible for "The Ribbon Project" in the early 90s, which made the red ribbon the symbol for the epidemic and the desperate need for research, funding and compassion for those living with the virus.

With his recent passing, it's especially important to not only recognize O'Connell's contributions to the HIV/AIDS community, but to the entire world. By turning the fear, anger and sadness that permeated the early days of AIDS into a concerted effort to make the world a safer place for us all, Patrick literally changed the way the world looked at AIDS.

So the next time you see a red ribbon, think of Patrick O'Connell. If you have one, consider wearing it once in awhile. You'd be surprised by how many knowing glances you'll get from people whose lives have been touched by the epidemic.

And I can't think of a more fitting tribute.

Positively Yours,

Shawn

If you'd like to learn more about Visual AIDS, or make a donation in Patrick's honor, check out their website.

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